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Open Peer Commentary

The self in its social context: Why resilience needs company

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Abstract

In their target article, Kalisch et al. explicate an appraisal-based model to explain how people bounce back from stress. We posit that for their model, it is crucial to understand the begin-state φ (the "self") – a state that is shaped by early social thermoregulation and through the social network.

In their target article, Kalisch et al. provide an appraisal-based model to explain resilience from stress. Three cognitive classes shape their posited individual's appraisal style: positive situation classification, reappraisal, and interference inhibition. They posit that a positive appraisal style is "the primary pathway to resilience" and that their model provides new avenues for prevention. We concur with the authors that we need to rely on biosocial models to understand the development of resilience. In our view, however, the model misses an important component: the functional relevance of the agent's relational experiences.

We concur that stress, and, more broadly, emotions have adaptive functions. But

for their model and for interventions, it is crucial to know whether emotions should be reappraised or whether they can actually contribute to resilience. We think that for answering this question, we need to extend Kalisch et al.'s biosocial model by adding the agent's begin-state φ – a resilience factor they ponder about. Prevention interventions that are focused solely on individual facets and ignore the agent's relational context (the two indeed being nonindependent) may well lead to alienation in some instances – and, we think, to greater stress, poorer resilience, and worse health instead.

Where does the “self” (φ) come from?

The begin-state φ may just as well be defined as “self.” Positive situation classification, reappraisal, and interference inhibition typically are regarded under a larger umbrella that researchers have dubbed self-regulation, a crucial factor in resilience (Hofmann et al. 2012; Lindenberg 2013). But the nature of this self is “obscure” and “mysterious even” (Swann & Buhrmester 2012, p. 424), and the reflection on our own experiences is even often wrong (Nisbett & Wilson 1977). What is it then that makes a begin-state φ that, in turn, influences the functionality of emotions for resilience? Humans cannot function without others, and evolution has likely “designed” humans with a biological bias to “assume that [they are] embedded within a relatively predictable social network characterized by familiarity, joint attention, and interdependence” (Beckes & Coan 2011, pp. 976–77).

From this standpoint, facing the world alone is more challenging than with others, and the development of self is virtually impossible without being with others. It is nearly impossible to find individuals who are simultaneously well adjusted, healthy, and socially isolated. In other words, the self, which “regulates various reactions and activities” and “experiences life and attempts to make sense of it” (Swann & Buhrmester 2012, p. 423, 424) should emerge from basic relational structures.

Extending the biosocial model: The emergence of begin-state φ

A more complex and coherent self is related to a more predictable social world, and we agree that biosocial models are vital to understand its development. Indeed, this aspect of a predictable world can be profitably unpacked in light of findings on rodents. One of the two evolutionary causes of group living in rodents is social thermoregulation, the idea that others are involved in regulating one's body temperature (Ebensberger 2001) and therefore metabolic resources (Beckes & Coan 2011). As others – also for humans – are crucial in regulating

our energetic resources in early life (Beckes & Coan 2011), social thermoregulation can help us regulate energetic resources, incidentally and throughout development (Beckes et al. 2014; IJzerman et al. 2014a). And social thermoregulation may free energy to be dedicated to other parts of the brain. To take but one example, maternal thermoregulation in rats extends the stress hyporesponsive period, protecting the developing infant brain and allowing it to mature (Suchecki et al. 1993). Social thermoregulation is a potential candidate for aiding the emergence of φ, through specific, dedicated social regulation structures.

Alienation – understanding the early social network

Some research on humans supports what we theorize above. For example, kangaroo care (keeping the infant skin-to-skin, allowing for comparable maternal thermoregulation) has been found to lead to increased executive functioning in the child (Feldman et al. 2014). Further, certain types of self-control lead to alienation (i.e., a state in which the individual neglects its own needs and desires; Koole et al. 2014), which is supported by the finding that individuals from countries that are less (vs. more) socially integrated are more vulnerable to becoming alienated when they are under severe stress such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Jobson & O'Kearney 2009). We also found that an ability that leads to better reappraisal – interoception (Carlson & Mujica-Parodi 2010; Füstös et al. 2013) – closely relates to social thermoregulatory processes: People's interoceptive abilities correlated significantly with the comfort they feel being touched by close others (IJzerman et al. 2014b).

So what do we need so as to make Kalisch et al.'s model sufficiently precise for interventions? The work we cite suggests that the begin-state φ indeed emerges from its relational context and that, in turn, φ influences the role of emotions for resilience. A first – but certainly not only – take on operationalizing this begin-state φ in the model is to use attachment style as proxy for predictability in early social thermoregulation. It is well known that securely attached individuals typically cope more constructively (e.g., Mikulincer & Florian 1995; Mikulincer et al. 1993) but, crucially, also reveal greater self-complexity (Mikulincer 1995). Comparably, state predictability – like secure relationships – allows for spontaneous facial emotion regulation, such as a spontaneous smile to a partner's angry face (Häfner & IJzerman 2011). We take from this that the secure agent's emotions directly inform how the agent should act in specific social situations, allowing it to maintain its social bonds. In addition, the display of emotions of securely attached individuals may play an important role in validating others' goals, which, in turn, leads to mutual reinforcement of secure attachment

(Arriaga et al. 2014). We therefore propose that in such cases, not reappraising one's emotions leads to greater resilience.

The agent's begin-state φ, itself dependent on social thermoregulation, is in this way vital in determining whether the agent's emotional state is likely to inform or distract the agent. We think therefore that, paradoxically, intervening in the secure agent's emotional life leads to its alienation, potentially causing worse resilience, greater stress, and poorer health instead.

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